DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 562 IR 055 015

AUTHOR Seels, Barbara; Fredette, Barbara
TITLE A Dialogue about Mythological Symbols from the Campfire to the Digital Age.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 9p.; In: Visual Literacy in the Digital Age: Selected Readings from the Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (25th, Rochester, New York, October 13-17, 1993); see IR 055 055.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Mass Media; *Mythology; Oral Tradition; *Symbols (Literary); Visual Learning; *Visual Literacy
IDENTIFIERS Information Age

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of myths and symbols in society through the use of a hypothetical dialogue. The paper begins by explaining what myths are and the functions they serve. Mythology and mythical symbols of past and present are compared. These changes in the nature of mythological symbols are explored through a dialogue between an artist and a media producer. During this dialogue, the importance of the study of myths as symbols in an age of global and digital communication becomes apparent. The idea that a world mythodology may evolve from media experiences is introduced. If this is the case, visual literacy becomes important in order to prevent manipulation through symbolism. (Contains 14 references.) (JLB)

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A Dialogue About Mythological Symbols from the Campfire to the Digital Age

by Barbara Seels
Barbara Fredette

University of Pittsburgh
4A16 Forbes Quadrangle
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

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A Dialogue About Mythological Symbols from the Campfire to the Digital Age

Barbara Seels
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This paper starts by explaining what myths are and the functions they serve. Then, mythology and mythical symbols past and present are compared. Changes in the nature of mythological symbols are explored through a dialogue between an artist and a media producer. During this dialogue the importance of the study of myths as symbols in an age of global and digital communication becomes apparent. The idea that a world mytholdology may evolve from media experiences is introduced. However, to understand this premise the reader needs to know what myths are and how they relate to symbols.

A myth is a fictitious story which explains the meaning of life. According to Joseph Campbell (1988), it is a way to experience life. He was convinced that the common themes or archetypes found in stories and images were universal despite cultural variations (Cousineau, 1990). Myths and symbols of myths are not the same. Mythological stories often generate pictorial symbols which represent themes or aspects of myths. These stories helped early cultures to explain the patterns of events they observed recurring in their lives. Today these patterns may be interpreted by scientific or mathematical reasoning instead of stories.

The themes of myth remain constant throughout time and space, but the texts and images in the stories vary according to cultures and periods. In addition to cultural differences, there are variations in personal responses to myths. People create personal symbols as well as symbols that communicate to others. Myths are accessible through many symbolic referents, but to "read" these symbols one needs adequate and appropriate education, education which deals with the mythological meanings imbedded in images as well as with the words of a mythical story. The traditional form for myths is linguistic, but myths are also found in pictorial forms of language. To be mythologically literate it is necessary to be able to decode meanings in contemporary images as well as in stories.

Mythic knowledge helps us understand the connotations of symbols as universal messages.

> "Meaning is always broadened and endowed with great sensory power by myths.... Mythical consciousness accepts only ultimate truths.... Myths connect us directly to a lofty, universal ideal by speaking and reasoning with us in tones colored by passions and feelings" (Biro, 1982, p. 75).

IROSSOIS

To be literate in mythology we need to understand myths in contemporary form. We need to be knowledgeable about the universal ideas of myth so that we may interpret the symbols of our world. To be mythologically literate means to look for the mythic dimension in the various images provided by our culture. The world as seen from space may have a mythic presence, but only to those who are aware of the mythic dimension of that image. If one is aware of mythic connotations, this meaning dimension is readily apparent because "The allusionary base...is the generic term for the stock of meaning with which we think and feel" (Broudy, 1988, p. 22).
Mythical understanding is a critical component of this allusionary base.

The person who is not literate in terms of mythological themes and images may see only parts and not the whole which exists through the interaction of meaningful interrelationships. Roland Barthes (1985) raises the problem of not being able to decipher the code that explains the relationships among images. When life was simpler and cultures were more contained, mythic literature was manageable because it was limited to what was of most concern to everyone in the culture. The stories were simple and direct. Today's stories and images are complex composites that may borrow from many different mythic sources.

Today we have access to mythology from many cultures and in many forms. On the one hand, the spread of mythology beyond the campfire makes our mythic understanding richer and more connected, but on the other hand our mythic knowledge may become confused by the scope of the allusionary base. There are dangers associated with the worldwide representation of mythology. Both oversimplification or overwhelming complexity can affect the understanding of mythological meaning. There are two real dangers: one is that we will try to find mythological import in every image and the other is that no mythological meaning is perceived because the image is taken literally. The phenomenon of the television show Beverly Hills 90710 is an example. Because adolescent viewers accept it literally, a distorted view of adolescence can develop. If it is seen as having mythological implications, it is interpreted as having symbolic meaning and is less likely to be harmful. The result of the literal interpretation can be an assumption that this is what teenage life is like in the United States. Hans Blumenberg (1985) warns us about "manufactured myths" which do not have the significance of genuine myths but which try to evoke the dignity of myth in association with emotionally laden images, slogans of racism or charismatic leadership (p. xxvi).

Consistent with the oral tradition in which myths originated, the dialogue will be used to explore the ramifications of the changing role of mythological imagery. The dialogue presents two views on the role of visual literacy, that of the artist and the media producer.

* *

Artist: Do we agree on what a myth is?

Producer: I'm not sure. I use the word in two different ways--to describe a type of story and to mean a false assumption. Are both meanings necessary to explain the role of mythology in visual learning?

Artist: Actually the meanings have changed over time. In the past, myths were stories that helped explain other unexplainable phenomena. But today when we use the word we are usually referring to the erroneous or false assumptions that we call myth.

Producer: Originally they were used educationally. Plato believed the child should be educated through myths. Myths were accepted as important stories even though they were known to be untrue. Myths are supposed to be imaginary, fantastic, and unreal. Mythical worlds are full of unicorns,

mermaids, gods, sirens, ghosts, dragons and humans in bird form.

Artist: These forms are unreal, but there is always an element of truth in their function. Myths were our ancestors' way of reconciling conflicts between the known and the unknown. The Greek word "mythos" meant things spoken which represented events. The Gothic form of mythos, was the word "mandjan" which meant to remind.

Producer: When I think of the word "myth", I often think of the word "mystery". Perhaps they are ways of explaining mysteries. I also think of the word "transformation". A myth is an imaginative transformation. It's a creative product. What's your favorite myth?

Artist: Modern myth or historical myth?

Producer: Either? Both? If I know something about the myths you identify with, I know something about you, your self-concept or sense of identity.

Artist: In that case, be my guest. You go first.

Producer: I like Disney's story of The Little Mermaid. I think it will become a modern myth because it portrays the emotions that accompany the changes from adolescence to adulthood. It reminds me of my youngest daughter who is a competitive swimmer with long flowing hair. She's very emotional and sings the songs from *The Little Mermaid* all the time.

I guess my favorite modern myths would be myths about individuality, such as frontier myths of colonial or western times. It's fun to go to Disney World because so many mythical stories are portrayed in Frontierland and Liberty Square. There's the Hall of Presidents, Tom Sawyer, and Wild West Revue. I guess that tells you something about me already because I like to go back to another century and leave this one behind. I'm not very interested in futuristic myths.

Artist: I'm not sure what that means. Perhaps you're more comfortable reinterpreting the events of the past than anticipating the future. I like the myths that are stories specifically designed to help children cope with their lives. These are stories referred to by Bettleheim as folk fairy tales. A purist might disagree with categorizing fairy tales as myths, but we're using the term in the broad sense, aren't we? These fairy tales or myths offered children material that helped them form concepts of the world's beginning and of the social ideals they could pattern themselves after. In these stories they went through trauma, but they survived and remember--they lived happily ever after. The child inherently realizes that these stories are about inner processes not about the outside real world. Take the story of Cinderella. She went through a transformation didn't she? I like the myths of transformation. That's why I like butterflies which, by the way, are the symbol of Psyche, a Greek goddess - a mythological character.

Producer: Freud would say our favorite myths represent our fantasies, our wish fulfillment.

Artist: But aren't myths more universal and social than individual? Jung's idea of the collective unconscious represented by archetypes connects all of us in a mythic frame.

Producer: I think myths are very dramatic, and there has to be the suspension of disbelief you need with all drama in order to fully experience the recreation of life. Myths are stories which are essentially non-visual. But mythic stories often gave birth to rituals which are multisensory. These rituals provide perceptual experience which is used by artists as the basis for their art. The art in turn becomes a visual reminder of the myth. This circuitous "connectedness" between myth and art gives a meaning dimension to many works of art. Myths are transmitted orally until someone translates them into a visual form.

Artist: Do myths change meanings when they are represented by artists in visual rather than verbal form?

Producer: To some extent, but a picture can still present the drama of a story. Most great communication is story telling.

Artist: Myths evoke images in the mind. Much of our visual language comes from mythic symbols.

Producer: Like Yin and Yang.

Artist: Yes, And there are other circular images of wholeness. There are mandalas from the Far East, sun masks from American Indians, sun discs from Polynesia, and rose windows in cathedrals. They reflect both the whole external world as well as the internal one, the psyche. In fact, a common theme in myths is a search for identity, for one's place in the world. Long ago Odysseus went on his quest, and today we find that modern myths often have a quest to find one's self as a theme.

Producer: They say there are only a few basic plots or themes that dramatists have varied throughout centuries. This is true of myths, too. Different cultures develop different symbols to represent customs, norms, beliefs, but the themes, the "metastories", are the same across cultures. They are universal.

Artist: What are they? What do myths from the Orient have in common with myths from South America? What do medieval myths have in common with modern myths?

Producer: There are themes that have to do with life and death. They often come from hunting or planting cultures where the cycle of growth is important. There are themes that have to do with relationships between male and female or adult and child. I guess the themes I prefer have to do with ages of development, like childhood or adolescence, and the journey through life. I like modern myths like Horatio Algermore than ancient myths about God and mortals.

Artist: Don't forget about the myths with quest themes like King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table. They're journeys through life, too.

Producer: There are mythic roles also. One role is of innocence. It's very arcadian. The other role is of cleverness. This is sometimes the role of the trickster. These roles often represent good and evil. That's the nice thing about myths. They simplify our moral dilemmas. Some of my favorite myths are from the Northwest Indians who believed animals could transform themselves into humans and back again and while doing so could change roles from powerful characters to weak ones and back again. In doing so they confused people. Those who didn't know the story didn't recognize them and suffered the consequences of trusting foolishly. Read some of the Raven stories.

Artist: Every culture has characters that have archetypal meaning. They enlarge the story of our lives by bringing enrichment, excitement and meaning to our individual experience. They help us comprehend our human limitations.

Producer: They also give us guidelines for living that help us resolve conflicts with ourselves and others. This is one of the powerful purposes myths have had through the ages.

Artist: The mythical image is very important because it's born out of a confrontation with reality leading to a search for meaning. The story represents a truth of life, but it's in fantasy form so we can handle it, no matter how serious the topic.

Producer: I think myths enable leaders to lead us and artists to speak for us. Greek civilization and art depended on common ideas, held by all. Visionaries clarify and

build on myths. Until leaders find new mythic visions we accept, they will have trouble leading us.

Artist: I have doubts about myths moving into the political arena. Perhaps the political arena is a myth in itself. The role of advertising in this mythmaking effort should be examined. I question the ethics of consciously creating contemporary myths for controlling people.

Producer: Myths have always been in the social arena; so they've always been in the political arena.

Artist: Historically, myths were given visual form to help people reflect on their life experience. Today it seems our myths in visual form are designed to evoke non-reflective responses. When you receive a letter telling you by name that you are a finalist in a $10 million sweepstakes, the sender doesn't want you to think about it.

Producer: Some people may consider that letter a lie, not a myth. Others might say it's a modern myth that evolved from mass media. Do you believe our myths are still forming?

Artist: What do you mean?

Producer: I think that the world is in a time of transition. There are so many images everyone sees, images of the world from space and of the environment, images of people rebelling for freedom around the world. We don't know yet how people will synthesize these images. Myths may spontaneously result either through media coverage and criticism or media productions. In the past, after a myth evolved artists often created mythic images. It's hard for me to believe we won't have a world mythology from media experiences.

Artist: Yes, I think through media all of us have contact with the symbols of today's world. The problem may be with interpretation. Interpretation of images is a skill which must be learned.

Producer: What about power myths? I've always thought Barbie, Rambo and Superman were modern power myths because they were symbols of extraordinary power.

Artist: Yes and so was James Dean. But these examples are very shallow and superficial. They're hollow myths. They're mythological symbols, but they don't represent well developed myths.

Producer: There are some attempts in the media to create persona who deal with universal truths and who have more depth of character.

Artist: Maybe. Our old myths were usually of heros. But today seems to be the age of the anti-hero, of the myth of the common man. What mythic role would we assign to Marilyn Monroe? what about celebrities such as John Wayne? Is he a mythic hero.

Producer: I think so. There's a famous thesis in American history by Frederick Turner that's called the frontier thesis. It's fallen into disrepute but was very popular at one time. Turner said the idea of the frontier was essential to the American character. That whether an American experienced the frontier or not, it was part of our mythology and led to values, such as individuality. John Wayne is certainly the archetype for that thesis.

Artist: There are a lot of myths in history that influence our behavior. Just look at the number of frontier myths alone. Davy Crocket was no paragon. Gunslingers killed few in the west. There are so many myths about Indians, or I should say, Native Americans.

Producer: I think the myth that they were uncommonly savage proves my point about myths being political or used by leaders. History is written by the winners.

Artist: Are we entering the realm of myths as assumptions rather than stories and complex image?

Producer: I think so. But look at our presidents. There are many myths about them and many of the myths are associated with mythic images. Several presidents campaigned as being born in log cabins or born poor. But Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson weren't poor, and Harrison wasn't born in a log cabin. The question is, can an actual, real,human being be a myth? Many would say this is not possible because by definition mythological characters are fabrications in all cultures. Mythological characters are greater than men or women. Sometimes, however, a real persona takes on mythological characteristics because s/he comes to symbolize mythological, larger than life or universal qualities (Biro, 1982).

Artist: But stories and images associated with leaders such as presidents of the United States reflect the journey through life that is the concern of mythology.

Producer: Media figures can become mythical images. They may or may not help to develop global consciousness or understanding. Maybe ritual is no longer the core of mythology. Maybe multi-cultural understanding through media is.

Artist: I don't think so. Mythology has always had several clear functions, and multi-cultural education hasn't been one, although many people such as Joseph Campbell have used mythology for that purpose. Cross-cultural themes in myths identify commonalities but do not necessarily promote understanding of differences.

Producer: What do you think the functions of mythology are?

Artist: First, to give us an outlet for our sense of wonder? This is a mystical function. Next, to represent a culture in terms of ideas in iconic and verbal form. This is a metaphysical or cosmological function.

Producer: I'd add two more functions. There is obviously a sociological function. Myths help maintain the morals and manners of a culture. And there's a pedagogical function. They teach people how to live in harmony through the passages of life from birth to death. This is where the most universal themes are seen in myth.

Artist: I think the primary function of traditional mythology was best described by Goethe. He said that in myth the particular stands for the general revealing momentarily the unknowable. However, over time the educational or teaching value of myth has diminished. Myth makers of today assume that the visual imagery (or stimulus) they present will elicit instant unconsidered response by the reviewers. This means that the viewer must be able to interpret and respond critically based on an understanding of mass media's use of mythological symbols.
Producer: The relationship of myth to the semiotics of images which become cultural symbols is interesting. In his book on *The Semiotic of Myth*, James J. Liszka explains why the study of myths as symbols is important. He says that to the extent that they are believed, myths are dangerous symbols because they form a web that allows control of the culture. To subject myth to criticism is to criticize the culture. To control the myths of a culture is to control the people. To allow criticism is to dilute this power of control. The study of the semiotics of symbols is crucial to preventing control by dogma (Liszka, 1989).

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The best defense against control by mythology is an understanding of the semiotics of mythological symbols. If global media experiences in a digital age are likely to lead to a world mythology, visual literacy becomes important in order to prevent manipulation through symbolism. The first

step is to understand the nature of visual symbols of mythology by studying them. Then, what is learned will have to be related to educational goals. Scholars would do well to turn to the study of modern mythology and how it is generated instead of pursuing Aphrodite, Athena and Zeus.

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